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Fall 2013, RHET 201

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Research Paper

Islamophobia – Is it justified?

On July 1st, 2009, a 31 year old pregnant mother of a three year old son paid a very expensive price only for showing her Islamic identity, namely by wearing a headscarf. Marwa El Sherbini was stabbed 18 times in front of her son and her husband inside the courtroom of Dresden, Germany where she was suing her Russian stabber for defamation. This had happened when Marwa was asking Axel W., the Russian man, to let her child sit on a swing in a public park when he started verbally abusing her and accusing her of being a “terrorist” and “Islamist whore “. While trying to save her from the stabber, her husband was critically injured by a gunshot of the court policeman who later claimed to have mistaken him to be the attacker and accordingly, was mischarged of all claims. After all this tragedy, a very influential daily German newspaper called Die Welt, discussed this incident under the headline "Dead Egyptian woman: Islamists demand revenge" (Margolis). This is only one of thousands of the so – called hate crimes against Muslims since the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center on September, 11th, 2001. According to the FBI numbers, Anti – Muslims crimes ranged from 3,000 to 5,000 during 2011 alone, 10 years after 9/11, while according to two major Department of Justice (DOJ) studies it is indicated that hate crimes are 20 to 30 times more than the figures that the FBI reports. ("FBI: Bias Crimes Against Muslims Remain at High Levels"). These hate crimes along with other forms of “islamophobic” insults in all countries where Muslims are a minority has not

yet terminated making Islamophobia a serious, widespread and highly influential phenomenon worth studying. To be able to investigate it, first the definition of Islamophobia should be clear. So, what does the term Islamophobia mean?

The term Islamophobia consists of two words: Islam and Phobia. According to the Free Dictionary Farlix, one of the definitions of the word phobia is: “A persistent [...] and irrational fear of a specific thing or situation that compels one to avoid it, despite the awareness and reassurance that it is not dangerous”. There is also the term Xenophobia which means “hatred or fear of foreigners or strangers or of their politics or culture”. So, Islamophobia – a type of Xenophobia – is considered to be a conscious or unconscious irrational fear of Muslims and Islam, especially in the Western part of the world. The islamophobic hate crimes wave reached its peak just 48 hours after 9/11 (King). Some people tend to criticize the term “Islamophobia” itself as they do not think it is an irrational fear but rather a justified one based on either the actions of Muslims portrayed in the media or a certain understanding of Islam. Anthony Garrard Flew, a remarkable British philosopher and the author of the book that was called “There Is No God” which spread a lot of misconceptions about Islam and which he then changed short before his death to be called “There Is A God” once said: “I would never regard Islam with anything but horror and fear because it is fundamentally committed to conquering the world for Islam”. So, should Anti – Islamism, Anti – Muslims or Islamophobia be considered a form of religious discrimination or is it a natural feeling derived from actual danger? Through primary and secondary research and sources, the answer to this question is found to be: Islamophobia is a religious discrimination affecting innocent people who are or appear to be Muslims, especially after 9/11. This is due to the generalization of the guilt of any terroristic attack on the whole Muslim community and even on Islam. To conclude this answer, several aspects had to be

tackled and evaluated which will be the concern of this research paper. These are causes, triggers, pattern and consequences of Islamophobia and misconceptions about Islam.

The main causes of Islamophobia are divided into two types: The first type is about the terroristic actions claimed to be done by some Muslims and the economic and social situation of countries where Islam is the predominant religion. Although a former CIA agent, called Susan Lindauer, decided after 10 years of 9/11 to declare to the public as a witness with evidence that the attack of 9/11 was an inside job and hijacked by the CIA to make the idea of declaring war on Iraq more acceptable to the public opinion (Lindauer), there is no official announcement on the media that suggests a similar scenario. So, even if this was true, it would not change the fact that 9/11 attack was perceived to be done by Muslim Jihadists, where almost 3,000 people died, including Muslims. Many other smaller terrorist attacks preceded 9/11, however the most recent and the most covered by international media was the Boston Marathon Bombings where three people died and the Chechen Muslim suspect was killed afterwards in a manhunt by the police while hiding in a boat. The reports of the neighbors of the suspect and his mother show how surprised they are and that they would have never imagined him to be a terrorist (Tomlinson). When some ordinary people watch this, they would become more suspicious about Muslims around them. They would think they appear peaceful yet they hide their violent nature working underground. The results of a study conducted on 204 participants from various ethnic backgrounds in a California State University shows that Non Muslim Americans show more negative attitude and fear when a Muslim is boarding their tickets to go on the same plane they are going to, and when they are buying a used car from a Muslim compared to their attitude towards non specified ethnic groups (Khan). The main issue here lies in the focus on the ethnicity and religious affiliations of terrorists, though terror is not related to any religion and

even contradicts all of them. 81 % of American Muslims and 72 % of Muslims across the globe think that suicide bombings and similar acts are never justified. ("The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society." 36). According to the EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) another shocking statistics indicates that less than 1% of all the terrorists attacks between 2006 – 2010 were done by Muslims, whereas 73% were committed by separatists groups in Europe. Moreover, only 94% of all terrorist attacks between 1980 and 2005 were committed by Non -Muslims (Danios). In addition to that, according to a 2006 Gallup poll, people have a more favorable perception of Muslims when they personally know one. (Kakani). The unstable conditions of the countries in the Islamic World, civil wars, revolutions, honor killings in Pakistan and underdevelopment are also major causes of fearing Muslims who seem not to cope with the modern civilization and globalization. However, according to the findings of a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, "Most Muslims see no inherent tension between being religiously devout and living in a modern society." Moreover, when Muslims in countries where honor killing is an issue, were surveyed, the majority see it as unjustified. ("The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society." 11-10). The important point here is that cultural traditions and differences are often confused with Islamic teachings. Honor killings; for example, is prohibited in Islam not ordered by Islam.

This leads to the second type of the causes of Islamophobia, namely the misconceptions about Islam. Killing non-believers, Jihad, underestimation of women, the Hijab and brutal punishments are the major confusion parts and misunderstandings to many Non – Muslims. The two reasons for this confusion are either lack of knowledge of Non – Muslims about the correct meanings of certain verses in the Quran or ignorance and wrong practice of Islam by some Muslims. Anti – Islamists as well as Muslim extremists usually quote only a part of a verse cutting it from its

context which results in changing and sometimes reversing its meaning. For instance, concerning killing non – believers, the part of a verse “Kill them whenever you find them” is quoted without the rest of the verse which states “And kill them wherever you find them, and turn them out from where they have turned you out. And Al-Fitnah is worse than killing. And fight not with them at Al-Masjid-al-Haram, unless they (first) fight you there. But if they attack you, then kill them. Such is the recompense of the disbelievers.” (Quran 2: 191) Quoting the whole verse makes it clear who “them” are. Those are aggressors who took over the Muslims land and Allah is ordering Muslims to defend themselves prohibiting them from attacking if they were not attacked first. Even the verse before this exact one is stating clearly: “Fight in the way of Allah those who fight you but do not transgress. Indeed. Allah does not like transgressors.” (Quran, 2:190). There are many other examples of misuse and misunderstanding of verses in the Quran. The word “Jihad” is usually understood as a synonym for “terrorism”, while, in fact, “Jihad” could mean “war on terrorism”. There are two types of Jihad: spiritual Jihad, striving or struggling against oneself and against temptations to become a better person, e.g. through giving to charity, standing against tyrants, trying not to feel superior...etc, and combative Jihad which is physically fighting to defend your country, religion or family. The combative Jihad has certain constraints and rules that make it impossible to be equal to terrorism, such as not being allowed to either kill innocent people or to be the aggressor. Combative Jihad is also not allowed if a peaceful alternative exists. These are only two examples of many other misunderstandings of Islam that are not being refuted and explained properly by Muslims or by the international media. Muslims have failed in promoting their religion after 9/11 (Rahim 9).

Triggers of a certain incident are different from its reasons. A trigger means a cause for something to function. There is no smoke without fire. So, the reason for hate crimes against

Muslims might be fear and hatred because of certain actions of Muslims, and the trigger would be the cause for this hate to exist and to be transformed into actions of violence or intolerance and discrimination against Muslims. As mentioned before, if the terrorist attacks made by Muslims are only 1% of all terrorist attacks between 2006 and 2010, why is it that “terrorism” is always associated with the image of a Muslim? A study conducted revealed that “39 percent of Americans support that all Muslims should carry a special ID card and 6 in 10 Americans think that Muslims are more prone to violent extremes” (Rahim 3). Why would the fear of Muslims reach this point? There must be triggers for this extreme feeling of intolerance for some Non-Muslims. Summarizing all opinions about this matter, three main triggers could be found, beside terrorists events: politics and economic interest, the huge impact of an exaggerating, most probably manipulating and directed media and finally the “Islamophobia Industry”.

These three triggers must be correlated because if there is a political agenda that a certain government is trying to realize, history has proven that media and propaganda is always the first tool to use. An “industry” for Islamophobia exists through established organizations in order for the media to have substance against Muslims to promote. This so-called Islamophobia industry is what the American author Nathan Lean discusses in his book *The Islamophobia Industry: How the Right Manufactures Fear of Muslims*. Lean argues that Islamophobia, like any other industry, has its customers, products and shareholders. Lean claims that journalists, after deep investigations, were able to expose the existence of anonymous donors funding this industry. As for the owners, “Lean identifies two main stakeholders [...]: some groups from the Christian right and few other groups from the pro-Israel right” (Mazigh). Certainly, it is not enough to argue this based on only one author or one source. However, many other sources which are supposed to be credible seem to report similar stories and even document it in visual videos:

“Remarkably, The Center for American Progress reports that over the last decade \$43 million dollars in funding was contributed to support anti-Muslim thinkers in the U.S. (Hing, 2011)” (Zaal). Moreover, the Council of American Islamic Relations identifies 37 groups which directly work to defame Islam and with a total revenue of almost \$200 million between 2008- 2010 (“Islamophobia and its Impact in the United States”). Other than these reports, a documentary called “Islamophobia – A Documentary” published on YouTube films how a far right movement, called “The English Defense League” was spreading hatred towards Muslims through offensive demonstrations and aggressive Anti – Islamic speeches in Britain (Current TV). This league was established in 2009 till today as an opposition to Islamic Extremists in theory, while in reality it was against the whole Muslim community, especially Muslim immigrants in their homeland. These are only very few examples of countless organizations, activists, organized movements and campaigns directed against Muslims.

Not only well – funded organizations were successful at causing a “friction” between Muslims and Non – Muslims and leaving negative impressions about the whole Muslim community, the international media, especially the American media and the influence of educators in schools and colleges had and still have an essential role, too. “In the aftermath of 9/11, Islam and terrorism became almost synonymous in the media” (Kakani). The media uses two main influential techniques used in manipulation when it comes to Islamophobia: fear mongering rhetoric and inoculation technique. Fear mongering rhetoric is when fear is used to influence and direct opinions to reach the desired end using sometimes exaggeration, lies and repetition to consolidate certain ideas with time in people’s subconscious if not directly in their conscious. As of inoculation, it is a technique used to show only the darker and evil side of events and figures and making people think that they may hide even darker evil. “These

negative images of Muslims work like the “stickiness factor” [...] by sticking in the minds of millions of people, fueling bias and prejudice” (Rahim 3). Not only in Talk Shows were the characteristics that identifies some Muslims (beards, niqab, hijab...) made fun of and portrayed in a very ugly and terrifying way, in countless number of movies, whenever an Arab or Islamic figure is to be presented, it has to be either a male terrorist or an oppressed Muslim woman. The worst of these movies, is a movie called *The innocence of Muslims* which depicted the prophet Mohamed as a pedophile and a crazy violent person. This, of course, caused rage among Muslims and some even expressed it violently. Because movies are the closest representation of people’s daily life and values, they must have even a greater influence than Talk Shows. These techniques are also used inside the classrooms in schools where they educate children to fear Muslims through associating anti – civilized actions with Muslims. Accordingly, the rate of bullying Muslims at schools has increased rapidly (Zaal), (Sway).

So, what are the intentional or unintentional political implications of such promotion of prejudices and hatred towards Muslims and Islam? The sequence and correlation of certain events preceding 9/11 and other terrorist attacks make three implications obvious for analysts: justification to go into war with Iraq for economic reasons such as oil acquisition, a legitimization of the Israeli occupation, and a distraction of the public opinion in the USA from internal fatal problems as the Economic Crisis in the USA.

Apart from the political consequences of Islamophobia and the hate crimes committed, Muslims as well as the community they are living in are also affected socially and psychologically. In some countries discrimination against Muslims has exceeded being individual to be legalized. In some parts of France, Germany and South Asia, for instance, Niqab and even Hijab were banned (Sway). One of the case studies related to this ban in France is

about a 35 year old mother, called Amina who was not allowed to go with her daughter on a school trip because she was wearing a headscarf and hence not respecting the secularity of France, as claimed by the teacher. The daughter saw how her mother was humiliated in front of her classmates and wanted to move to another school. The daughter began to have fears of the University life which most young people dream of because someday she would want to wear a headscarf herself (Muir). Concerning the fear of being discriminated against, some Muslims avoid acknowledgment of their faith unwillingly, such as taking off the Hijab (Rahim). Besides, “according to a Columbia University study, 7% of Muslim students in New York report being assaulted” (Mujahid). This means there are at least 7,000 students out of the 100,000 Muslim school students in New York who are being bullied or discriminated against. Muslims experience discrimination not only in schools or at work but even on the streets, on trains and busses and even by police officers when Muslims are the first to suspect. There are countless real life examples of social discrimination which naturally leads to major psychological effects on the whole Muslim community. “The Gallup Center reported that Muslim youth aged 18 to 28 are the least happy and the angriest compared to the youth of other faith groups in America”. Moreover, according to a Yale University study, 50% of Arab Americans had “clinical signs of depression” (Mujahid). In psychology, it is explained that if one repeats a lie he could eventually believe it. The same concept applies to innocent Muslims who are repeatedly addressed as “terrorists” and are treated as outsiders and are unwelcomed. “Under-represented groups that are often labeled will start to mimic these stereotypes out of acceptance by the common belief of their community” (Rahim 7). Some Muslims might actually begin to develop an aggressive attitude towards Islamophobs and start thinking: Those people are against Islam and are unjust; they

deserve violence. So, terrorism leads to Islamophobia and Islamophobia leads to terrorism and coming out of this vicious cycle becomes extremely difficult.

As a conclusion, there is no doubt that Islamophobia is an unhealthy and an unwanted feeling in every society where Muslims are a minority. The social, psychological and political consequences of Islamophobia on the whole Muslim community make it clear that they outweigh the consequences of the terrorist attacks done by Muslims on Non-Muslims. A phenomenon like Islamophobia should be taken seriously because after all, Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world with a population of 1.6 billion, almost a quarter – of the world population (Desilver). So, theoretically Islamophobia affects 1.6 billion people. As a Muslim myself and as someone who is affected directly by the implications of Islamophobia, it is of a huge importance for me to address this issue, to examine its roots and to clarify some misunderstanding and misconceptions about my religion. My thesis which states that Islamophobia is, in fact, a religious discrimination and not a justified feeling, has been asserted and supported by my research and the paper written in accordance. A manipulative media and an industrialized Islamophobia accompanied with lack of knowledge of Muslims and Non – Muslims alike were triggers for this hate to accelerate or for stereotypes and fear of Muslims to exist. This disturbs relations in societies and communities and makes the coexistence of Muslims a depressing experience. In order to at least decrease the tense of this feeling, solutions must be developed as soon as possible. Muslims must be aware that in the eyes of some Non – Muslims they represent Islam and not themselves. So, they should make an extra effort to follow the teachings of Islam which encourages good attitude and manners. Interfaith dialogues and discussions could also help increasing people's knowledge about Islam, so that people would develop the skill of differentiating the teaching of a religion from the actions of its believers. Muslim family members should also be close and be supportive to each

other, especially to the children, to overcome insults and discrimination so as not to fall into depression. Educators in school should have the role of teaching students not to generalize, to be tolerant and to respect differences and not to believe everything mentioned in the media rather than teaching them to hate and discriminate. Everyone in the society has a role to play in decreasing Islamophobia and as the Quran says in 41:34: "[...] Repel (the evil) with one which is better then verily! he, between whom and you there was enmity, (will become) as though he was a close friend."

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